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REAL ESTATE JOURNAL | APRIL 2008

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Fiona Ma: A Bay Area Transportation Champion

California's transportation vision begins to take shape.

By Josie Garthwaite and Vladimir Bosanac

As the Assembly Majority Whip in California's Congress, Fiona Ma brings a progressive perspective to Sacramento. This San Francisco native, who had also represented the Sunset district on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, has been at the state congress as a representative of the San Francisco and San Mateo counties since 2006 and is the highest ranking Asian American woman in the California legislature. Her tremendous efforts to pass important bills that help California's working families and its environment have been recognized by many throughout the state. However, it is in her role as chair of the Legislative High-Speed Rail Caucus that Ma is working to combat global warming through the construction of a high-speed train that will move California forward and help reduce the number of cars on the state's highways. We sit down with Fiona Ma to discuss a deeper impact of transportation development on our region and the state as a whole.



From a political perspective, where should the Bay Area focus, when it comes to transportation development, and why?

I am a strong supporter of rail transportation and believe that high-speed rail will bring needed improvements along existing rail lines and expand service. Under the leadership of former Senate Transportation Chair Quentin Kopp, the California High-Speed Rail Authority is working diligently to develop such a system.

I also support expanded ferry service, which will not only help commuters, but also improve California's emergency response infrastructure. Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata's leadership on Bay Area transportation, including the passage of Regional Measure 2, will result in a legacy of vital transportation projects for years to come.

We can't simply expand highways and expect that all of our transportation needs will be met. That's why, these initiatives and other creative proposals, like transit oriented development are so crucial to California's future.

What can real estate professionals in California do to encourage this public investment?

Every Californian has a role to play in supporting public investment in transportation. By effectively planning for growth and development, government can generate the new property and sales tax revenues needed to support operating costs for transit and regular maintenance of roads. Real estate professionals should closely monitor the decisions made at the local level to ensure that planning decisions promote responsible growth that will generate the revenues to support this public investment.

What role will your office, or anyone's in Sacramento, for that matter, play in helping the Bay Area improve its infrastructure to support the growth this region will experience in the next few decades?

We are fortunate to have such a qualified and committed Bay Area delegation. However, with term limits, we are often facing tremendous turnover and loss of institutional memory. That is why I have worked closely with former Senate Pro Tem John Burton, former Senate Transportation Chair Quentin Kopp and others to continue our region's transportation progress.

Our next Assembly Member from San Francisco's East Side, Tom Amiano, also has an abiding interest in transportation, and he has served on the Metropolitan Transportation Commission for many years. He'll be a tremendous addition to the Assembly.

With the Bay Area Council's help, we successfully funded Doyle Drive's safety improvements at the California Transportation Commission. We face

extraordinary challenges in the years ahead, including rebuilding our ports so that we can have a working waterfront, improving our airports to facilitate expected increases in travel and sustaining public transportation. I hope to leave a legacy in each of these areas that builds on California's past successes.

How can the city governments (San Jose, San Francisco, etc.) and the various organizations in those cities help promote the development of the transportation infrastructure?

I am so pleased that big city mayors have signed on to support our most important transportation priorities. Throughout the Bay Area, local governments are putting transportation priorities at or near the top of their lists.

Two things are important: Local communities must speak with one voice to have the greatest impact, and the local match has to be there. Through the leadership of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Bay Area has spoken with that unified voice and has put its money where its priorities are.

As a former member of the Association of Bay Area Governments Executive Board, I was able to work closely with local officials, some of whom have now joined me in the State Assembly. Assembly Members Jim Beall of Santa Clara County and Mark DeSaulnier of Contra Costa County bring their fiscal expertise and extensive experience to the table when we are discussing these issues.

How will the state's fiscal emergency affect transportation and development financing in the Bay Area over the next few years?

With the fiscal emergency, every program and service—including transportation—faces daunting budget news. However, transportation and development has secured an increasing amount of dedicated revenues such as bond funding, bridge tolls and sales taxes that cannot be easily taken away. From that perspective, transportation should be as stable as any program while we move forward.

You have advocated for a high speed rail system in California during the last two legislative sessions. How much of a priority will that be for you during 2008?

I am so pleased that the Governor included funding for high-speed rail in the budget, and that he is no longer attempting to delay the bond on the ballot this November.

Assembly Bill 3034, which I am authoring with Assemblywoman Cathleen Galgiani and Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, will provide the fine tuning to ensure that bond funds are well spent, that areas across the state can compete equally for funding and that matching funds will be secured. I am pleased that this proposal, which comes from working with the Governor's Office and High Speed Rail Authority, is before the Legislature. ■